

Reminiscences

REMINISCENCE

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Washday Tales Part I

There is a lot less structure to housework these days than there was in the '30s, '40s and '50s. By this I mean, for instance, Mondays was washday, Tuesday you ironed — we didn't have wash and wear fabrics back then and even sheets, socks and underwear were ironed. Shopping was done on a Wednesday, vacuuming on Saturday — each day had its duties. Guess that's why the phrase "woman's work is never done" was coined.

The chains shackling women to household duties weren't loosened until WWII when the unthinkable happened and women entered the work force in droves making it impossible to continue their former life styles. Industry became aware of that change and began inventing appliances to ease the work load.

Washing machines were very primitive in those days, nevertheless were a huge improvement over the buckets of water heated on a coal stove and poured into a huge copper tub before which the mother would stand with hands immersed into the hot sudsy water, pulling up garments to rub them against the washboard used before invention of the spin washer became a household necessity. Families were larger then and wash day took almost all day.

Advent of a machine that would wash clothes was heralded as a marvelous invention — and so it was. Still anything but easy. Not being familiar with the "old time" method of doing laundry so unlike opening the cover and flipping in clothing to be washed at the turn of a switch, I'm sure the following description of a typical washday will seem incredible to today's women born in the 1950s and thereafter.

Considerable preparation was necessary to do the week's laundry, and it was usually started right after breakfast was cleared away. An entire day was devoted to this project.

Some of these round tub washing machines were kept in a corner of the kitchen and sometimes on the back porch. On wash day the machine was wheeled close to the sink and a hose was attached to the faucet to fill the machine with hot water.

Kitchen sinks in those days were fashioned with what was termed a "deep sink" on the left, covered by a drainboard for draining hand-washed dishes, and a shallow, standard sink on the right.

The week's dirty clothes were brought to the kitchen and put into piles of whites, colored and dark clothes similar to today's separation of what should be washed with what — there the similarity ends.

The white pile got the best of the deal as those were washed first. There was no easy way to remove the laundry from the round tub of the machine, so a stick was used to get the clothing

from the hot soapy water and was guided (on the stick) to the deep sink filled with cold water where they would sit, hopefully releasing some of the soap suds, while the mother continued the next phase. The colored clothes then went into the tub of the machine and the machine would go through its cycle. By the end of the cycle the water would have cooled sufficiently to enable the housewife to remove that load without the aid of the stick. That lot went into a pail of clear water. By the time load number three — the dark clothes — went into the machine, the water was no longer clean and it was really cool, but that's the way it was done — at least by my mother.

Mom was then ready for phase two — the hose was again attached to the base of the tub of the machine and the soiled water was either emptied into the sink or the machine was wheeled to the door and the hose put outside to empty. The interior of the tub was wiped out, then back to the sink and again the hose was used to refill the tub with fresh water.

The entire procedure was repeated with this difference — as each piece of laundry was removed to the sink or pail after the rinsing, it was wrung out individually with Mom's hands. How tired she must have been by the end of the first load, let alone going through the procedure three times.

My mother had what at that time was an advanced invention, a roller wringer which could be attached to the top of the washing machine. It was good the machine itself was on wheels as each procedure required certain placement of the machine in the kitchen — near the sink, near the door or centered to allow one to operate the wringer.

Once the three loads had been hand-wrung and placed in sink or pails the machine would be emptied of the rinse water and the laundry tossed back into the machine for the wringing process.

When wringing was being done, a clothes basket was placed on the floor under the wringer. Mom would position herself at the right of the machine and feed a piece of clothing between the rollers with her left hand while operating the handle with her right. The clothing would fall into the basket as it left the wringer and this procedure would be repeated for the three loads.

Helpful as it was, the wringer left the laundry with quite a bit of water making the basket very heavy to carry outside and, if hung at that point, it took much longer to dry, so Mom always went through the wringer procedure twice resulting in clothing pretty well wrung out.

This wash day tale will be continued in two weeks...